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Writing conversations: Metalinguistic talk about writing

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Abstract

The place of grammar in both first and second language learning curricula has been long contested, particularly in Anglophone countries, where since the Dartmouth Conference of 1966, countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand have had an uncertain stance towards grammar, in many cases, completely eschewing grammar for many years. This historical attitude towards grammar, and professional ambivalence at best, or antipathy at worst, towards the teaching of grammar has been well-documented (Kolln and Hancock 2005; Locke 2009; Myhill and Watson 2014) and will not be repeated here. But at the heart of this apparent rejection of grammar was the conviction that the explicit teaching of grammatical terminology had no discernible impact on young learners' capacities as language users. Indeed, several research studies confirmed this (Elley et al 1979; EPPI 2004). However, this debate has been framed principally by a curriculum focus on the merits or otherwise of its inclusion, rather than any evidence-based or well-theorised consideration of the issue. Our own research at the University of Exeter, which informs this article, has revealed that when writing and grammar share the same learning focus, explicit grammar teaching can be beneficial in improving learners' outcomes in writing. This article sets out to ground the debate within a theoretical framework and in particular to consider the value of metalinguistic talk within a pedagogical approach to the teaching of grammar which foregrounds the meaning-making relationships of grammatical choices in writing.

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WRITING CONVERSATIONS: METALINGUISTIC TALK ABOUT WRITING

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Introduction:

The place of grammar in both first and second language learning curricula has been long contested, particularly in Anglophone countries, where since the Dartmouth Conference of 1966, countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand have had an uncertain stance towards grammar, in many cases, completely eschewing grammar for many years. This historical attitude towards grammar, and professional ambivalence at best, or antipathy at worst, towards the teaching of grammar has been well-documented (Kolln and Hancock 2005; Locke 2009; Myhill and Watson 2014) and will not be repeated here. But at the heart of this apparent rejection of grammar was the conviction that the explicit teaching of grammatical terminology had no discernible impact on young learners' capacities as language users. Indeed, several research studies confirmed this (Elley et al 1979; EPPI 2004). However, this debate has been framed principally by a curriculum focus on the merits or otherwise of its inclusion, rather than any evidence-based or well-theorised consideration of the issue. Our own research at the University of Exeter, which informs this article, has revealed that when writing and grammar share the same learning focus, explicit grammar teaching can be beneficial in improving learners' outcomes in writing. This article sets out to ground the debate within a theoretical framework and in particular to consider the value of metalinguistic talk within a pedagogical approach to the teaching of grammar which foregrounds the meaning-making relationships of grammatical choices in writing.

Theorising Grammar in the curriculum

As noted above, research which has been used to verify a belief that there is no beneficial impact of grammar on learners' language use, particularly in writing, has offered no clear conceptual rationale for why grammar teaching might support writing development. Indeed, Hudson (2015:298) argues that *'now that the pendulum is swinging back to grammar teaching, it is easy to identify yawning gaps in the research that underpins it'*. For example, one of the more robust studies frequently cited as evidence of the impotence of grammar teaching is Elley et al's 1979 study. This was a three year longitudinal study with eight matched classes with a total sample of 250 children, and three teachers who each taught one of the groups over the three years. Setting aside that statistically eight classes in one school is nonetheless a small sample, the study had three treatment groups: the first undertook a transformational grammar course, which in effect taught knowledge about language, including specific grammatical terminology; the second group had a reading and writing course, which included 20% of the time devoted to creative writing; and the third group followed a 'business as usual' secondary English programme, typical of New Zealand schools at that time. The data showed no significant differences in writing outcomes for any of the groups. But, like other studies of its kind, there is no attempt to theorise an instructional relationship between grammar and writing which might inform the design of an appropriate pedagogical approach. Rather the extant research appears to be predicated upon a very simplistic model which assumes a direct causal relationship between grammar input and the quality of writing output.

Our own research, therefore, sought to investigate the role of grammar teaching in the writing curriculum by first of all considering a theoretical rationale for its inclusion, drawing on empirical and

theoretical research on metalinguistic knowledge and understanding. Gombert's seminal work (1992) on metalinguistic development conceives of metalinguistic knowledge as a subfield of metacognition, specifically concerned with language. He defines two strands to metalinguistic knowledge: firstly, '*activities of reflection on language and its use*', and secondly, individuals' '*ability intentionally to monitor and plan their own methods of linguistic processing (in both comprehension and production)*' (Gombert 1992: 13). The key distinction between metalinguistic activity and epilinguistic activity for Gombert is that the latter is not '*consciously monitored by the subject*'. Although his work on metalinguistic understanding is more concerned with oral language development, Gombert does note that the absence of an immediate reader and immediate feedback makes writing more challenging, and he argues that '*metalinguistic development thus appears to be of primary importance in the acquisition of writing*' (1992:152). In his taxonomy of different kinds of metalinguistic knowledge, Gombert also notes that metasyntactical understanding, '*the ability to reason consciously about the syntactic aspects of language, and to exercise intentional control over the application of grammar rules*' (1992:41) cannot be learned implicitly but requires '*school work on the formal aspects of language*' (1992:62). Unlike Gombert, we were not interested in the routine application of rules in writing, which is not a major problem for most first language writers: rather, we were interested in developing metalinguistic understanding of language choices in writing, and how those choices create subtly different nuances of meaning. Consequently, for us, explicit teaching of grammar sets out to develop conscious metalinguistic understanding of the repertoire of choices available in writing, and conscious control of those choices in creating written texts.

In tandem with theorising grammar teaching in the light of conceptual thinking about metalinguistic understanding, we integrated contemporary understandings of the role of talk in facilitating learning. Given the emphasis on *conscious* metalinguistic understanding, there is a particular place for understanding which can be verbalised (Camps and Milian 1999; Roehr 2008) because it is understanding which can be shared and made visible to others, particularly teachers. Recent sociocultural research addressing talk for learning has highlighted the saliency of dialogic talk, where learners co-construct understanding together with peers or teachers. Fundamental to dialogic talk is an open-ended, exploratory dialogue (Mercer and Littleton 2007; Wegerif 2011), targeted towards a clear learning purpose (Littleton and Howe 2010). Highly relevant to metalinguistic understanding is dialogic talk which encourages learners to articulate and justify their own thinking (Chinn, O'Donnell, and Jinks 2000; Gillies 2015). In Gombert's terms, such talk is likely to enable active reflection on language use and to support conscious monitoring and control.

We drew on this theoretical framework to inform the design of an appropriate pedagogical approach (Jones et al 2013) to the teaching of grammar in the writing curriculum. The view of writing underpinning our theorisation is that writing is a communicative act, rooted in socio-cultural understandings (Prior 2006) and that writers need to develop understanding of the social purposes and audiences of texts and how language choices create different meanings and effects. This socio-cultural view of writing rests naturally within a Hallidayan conceptualisation of grammar as a meaning-making resource (Halliday 1993), where grammar is a metalinguistic tool which enables writers to make language choices which help them to shape and craft text to satisfy rhetorical intentions. And crucially, our theoretical framework brings together writing as a social practice and grammar as a meaning-making resource by focusing instruction on supporting writers in making connections between their various language experiences as readers, writers and speakers, and in making connections between *what* they write and *how* they write it. This is especially important in

light of the history of grammar teaching, where it has *'traditionally been taught and learned in an environment that is devoid of context'* (Mulder 2010: 73). Our pedagogical design, therefore, is constructed around developing metalinguistic understanding through teaching which a) recognises writing as a social act, b) fosters understanding of the meaning-making affordances of grammar, and c) seeks to make explicit connections between the two. And finally, cognisant of the rich potential of dialogic talk in making metalinguistic understanding in writing verbalisable, the pedagogical design builds in multiple opportunities for learners to talk about their choices in writing.

Empirical research

The body of research we have conducted into the grammar-writing relationship stemmed from the recognition, discussed above, that previous studies had never appropriately established a theoretical rationale for any learning link between learning grammar and improvement in writing. We were also keen to avoid oversimplified mono-directional models of causation, based upon simple input-output models. Instead, our intention was to investigate whether explicit teaching of grammar which was relevant to the writing being addressed and which was undertaken through the adoption of a particular pedagogic design could improve students' writing outcomes and develop their metalinguistic understanding of writing. We were also keen to adopt research methods which acknowledged the complexity of teaching and the pivotal role that the teacher plays in mediating learning.

Accordingly our first study, in effect the parent study for this sequence of studies, was a randomised controlled trial with a complementary qualitative dataset. This study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) involved 31 classes of students aged 12-13 years in 31 schools (n=744). Prior to random allocation to a comparison or intervention group, the class teachers were given a grammatical knowledge test and the sample stratified so that two matching groups were formed with similar profiles of teacher grammatical subject knowledge. Following randomisation, the intervention group received training on using the intervention teaching materials. Each class involved in the study taught three units of work over a single school year, addressing the writing of fictional narrative, argument, and poetry. The teaching units were fully consistent with the national curriculum expectations at the time, and all classes addressed the same learning objectives, and the teaching led to the same assessed writing outcomes. The intervention group, however, also received detailed lesson planning and resources which supported them in making direct connections between a grammar point and a learning focus in writing, and in creating opportunities in lessons for high-quality talk about language choices. The effect of the intervention was measured using a cross over pre and post test design with two writing tasks, set by and marked by an independent assessment organisation. The findings of this study pointed to a significant positive effect for the intervention group, with some evidence that the more able writers benefited most (Myhill et al 2012; Jones et al 2013). It also indicated that teachers' grammatical subject knowledge was an important mediating factor (Myhill et al 2013).

The qualitative data which accompanied the RCT involved lesson observations of both the comparison and intervention groups, post observation interviews with the teachers to discuss their pedagogical thinking in the lesson and their reflections on student learning, and interviews with students about their learning in the lessons and about their language choices in their own writing. The qualitative data is reported more fully in Myhill et al (2012), but it highlighted that teachers felt that students *'were willing to risk opinions about language more'* as a consequence of the

opportunities afforded by the intervention. It also highlighted that students were more confident in metalinguistic discussion about lexical choices than syntactical choices, and that there was a clear relationship between those metalinguistic aspects of writing which teachers seemed to value and emphasise, and those aspects which students talked about most readily. This links with the statistical finding that teachers' grammatical subject knowledge was a mediating factor. Indeed, the lesson observations revealed that some teachers in the intervention group avoided the grammar built into the lessons, and also indicated that where teachers were lacking confidence in grammatical knowledge they frequently closed down metalinguistic talk.

Following this initial study, a sequence of further studies have explored particular aspects of the research. Two small-scale quasi-experimental studies, funded by Pearson, investigated the efficacy of the intervention for weaker writers, and its efficacy in the context of the national examination in English for 16 year olds (General Certificate of Secondary Education: GCSE). The first study (reported at <http://bit.ly/1Pu5jAT>) involved 7 schools, each with two classes of 12-13 year old students involved ($n=315$): in each school one class was allocated to the intervention and one to the comparison group. Prior to designing the teaching materials for the intervention, a preliminary analysis of less competent narrative writing drawn from the corpus of a previous study, was analysed to identify the writing needs of this group of students. This analysis highlighted that, in addition to general accuracy problems with punctuation at sentence boundaries and internal sentence punctuation, these weaker writers tended to create very plot-driven narratives, with limited character development or establishment of setting, poor management of the plot, and a tendency to use language patterns reflecting oral rather than written genres. A four week teaching unit was devised which drew on moving image and comic stimulus resources to highlight that information and mood conveyed visually in moving image or comic narratives needs to be conveyed verbally in written narrative. This unit drew attention to the importance of appropriate lexical choice of nouns, how noun phrases can establish character, and how short sentences can intensify dramatic moments in plot development. The data analysis indicated that the intervention group improved more than the control group at a level which was just statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The analysis also indicated considerable variability at the class level, with some classes improving at a much faster rate than others, again signalling the importance of the teacher in mediating the intervention.

The second study, (reported at <http://bit.ly/1kpoArV>), looked at older students than previous studies, and investigated the impact of the contextualised grammar approach on both reading and writing. Twelve classes of students aged 14-15 ($n=161$) studying for their GCSE examination in English were allocated to either a comparison or intervention group. While the comparison group were taught according to the usual practice of their teachers, the intervention group were taught a three week unit of work based on our pedagogical design. This unit set out to develop students' ability to analyse non-fiction texts and to write their own, with a focus on developing understanding of a repertoire of linguistic structures used in these texts. Both intervention and comparison groups were targeting the same GCSE assessment objectives, and an abridged sample examination paper (Edexcel GCSE English: Reading and Writing Non-Fiction) was used to measure reading and writing attainment pre and post intervention. The results of this study confirmed the earlier studies, with a statistically significant positive impact on students' written outcomes. In addition, however, this study indicated an even stronger positive impact on students' reading outcomes, specifically on those reading questions which required language analysis, rather than literal or inferential

comprehension. These findings may suggest that developing metalinguistic understanding of how written texts communicate meaning may be more quickly acquired than the transfer of that metalinguistic learning into their own writing.

Our most recent study, funded by the ESRC, is a qualitative exploration of metalinguistic learning about writing, seeking to understand better how students respond to explicit grammar teaching, the relationship between how teachers teach and students' metalinguistic learning, and how students use and apply that metalinguistic learning. The study is a three year longitudinal study working with two primary schools and two secondary schools. In each school, one class has been tracked for three years, with lesson observations and video capture of the teaching and with termly interviews with nine students in each class. We have called these interviews 'writing conversations' because they involve discussing the student's and peers' writing, either as work in progress or as a completed piece, so the interview is very much led by the writing itself and the teaching which elicited that writing. As such, the interviews are examples of metalinguistic talk, which verbalise metalinguistic understanding. The video capture has also facilitated detailed analysis of teachers' management of classroom metalinguistic talk. We will draw on some of this data later in the article.

Understanding the Intervention

As described earlier, we have developed a framework for pedagogical design which is based on a theorised rationale for the role of grammar in the writing curriculum. In our first study, this theoretical framework was communicated with teachers in the form of seven pedagogical principles which operationalised the theoretical ideas (see Myhill et al 2013 for a description of the initial seven). Following analysis of the qualitative data, it became evident that four of the principles were paramount, and these are now the four principles shared with teachers both in research studies and in professional development work. These four principles are:

- **Make a link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing being taught;
eg exploring how past and present tense are used in newspaper reports for recount and comment
- Explain the **grammar through examples**, not lengthy explanations;
eg exploring how prepositional phrases can establish setting in narrative through a card sort of a range of prepositional phrases from the opening description of the island in 'The Lord of the Flies'.
- Build in **high-quality discussion** about grammar and its effects.
eg discussing as a whole class the different grammatical choices in two students' drafts of the ending to an argument piece.
- Use examples from **authentic texts** to link writers to the broader community of writers;
eg using authentic charity campaign materials to model persuasive writing

Table 1 below gives a practical example of the pedagogical approach, exemplified in a lesson outline for an older secondary school class. The first principle, making a link between the grammar and the writing being attempted, is made explicit in the Writing and Grammar learning focuses. Here the lesson focuses on the choices made by Dickens as a writer in introducing the character of Magwitch: the lesson offers students the chance to explore in detail the linguistic features evident in this extract, before writing their own character description, using the same linguistic features. The

second principle, intended to focus on how grammar is used rather than being deflected into elaborated grammatical identification mini-lessons, is exemplified in the whole class discussion of noun phrases, where the teacher highlights what the noun phrases are but focuses on discussion of their meaning and inferences, rather than their grammatical structure. The third principle of building in high-quality talk about language is evident in both the whole class discussion where the teacher leads the conversation about Dickens' choices and their possible effects on the reader, and the in the final peer discussion, where writers explain their own choices to each other, thus verbalising their metalinguistic understanding. The fourth principle, using authentic texts, is exemplified in the use of Dickens' characterisation of Magwitch as a model for students' own character descriptions.

Writing Learning Focus:	➤ How Dickens creates a sense, on our introduction to Magwitch, that he is both terrifying and deserving of sympathy.
Grammar Learning Focus:	➤ How character can be established through noun phrases, and minor sentences.
Context:	The text extract here comes from the opening chapter when Pip first meets Magwitch: from Pip's perspective, Magwitch is terrifying but Dickens conveys a more ambivalent perspective for the reader. At the end of the novel, of course, Pip and Magwitch are very close, and Magwitch a sympathetic character. The use of detailed noun phrases to establish character, especially through the 'Show not Tell' technique, is very common in narrative fiction.
Text example: <i>Great Expectations</i> by Charles Dickens <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><i>A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.</i></p> </div>	
Let's Talk! Give the opening discussion enough time to allow students to explore their first impressions. In the whole class discussion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check they understand these are minor sentences, which are each a noun phrase (with <i>man</i> as the head noun), with no main verb. • Extend understanding by noting the passives in the third sentence (<i>had been soaked/ smothered/ lamed</i> etc), grammatically positioning him as victim. • Invite students to note the contrasting verbs: those which depict his discomfort, or vulnerability, (<i>limped; shivered; chattered</i>) with verbs which suggest aggression (<i>glared; growled; seized</i>). In the final peer discussion, support students in articulating their choices by	Activity Outline: <u>Whole class:</u> share the reading of the opening and gather first impressions of Pip and Magwitch. <u>Teacher:</u> display the text extract, and re-read it, and note that this moment is both Pip's first sight of Magwitch and ours as reader. <u>Pairs:</u> highlight in red all words or images which suggest Magwitch is to be feared, and in blue all words or images which suggest Magwitch is a victim/in discomfort. <u>Teacher:</u> take feedback and display the text extract with red and blue colours. <u>Whole class:</u> look at the three noun phrases Dickens uses to present Magwitch. What does the first NP convey? (he is an escaped prisoner/to be feared?) What does the second NP suggest? (poor; in a bad condition?) What does the third NP suggest? (he has had unpleasant things happen to him? But also he is frightening?) Foster discussion about whether Magwitch is a good or bad character, and how Dickens establishes this. <u>Individual:</u> using allocated visual image of a character, develop a description which clearly establishes their character, thinking carefully about how the choice of noun phrases supports this description. <u>Pairs:</u> read each other's descriptions and explain to each other what language choices you have made and how these choices

teacher modelling of the talk, if necessary.	establish the character
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Table 1: exemplifying the pedagogical design

The emphasis on high-quality talk in supporting the development of metalinguistic understanding about writing depends on teachers who can create classrooms where talk is a natural and organic element of learning. Lesson observation data in all our studies constantly underlines the importance of planning lessons which generate space for dialogic metalinguistic conversations, and of teachers with confidence in facilitating this kind of talk. In particular, the correlation of observational data with data drawn from writing conversations with students suggests that the fostering of high-quality talk supports children in making metalinguistic learning their own, rather than simply repeating back the more monologic exhortations of the teacher. There are three key contexts in which rich metalinguistic talk about writing, grammar and language choices can occur. The first is whole class discussion about texts, be that published texts or children's own writing, led by the teacher and often an important pedagogical input moment, where students are introduced or develop previous understanding about a particular linguistic choice. The second key context is in activities which generate pair and group talk about texts, such as the final activity in Table 1 where students articulate their own language choices, or a group activity investigating a particular language feature in a text. The third key context is the hardest to plan for as it relies on the live 'in the moment' response of the teacher: this is the spontaneous one-to-one talk between teacher and learner, often while the teacher is moving around the classroom during an activity. This context gives the teacher an opportunity to encourage students to verbalise their metalinguistic thinking, and to extend and enrich their current understanding. A further important benefit of creating rich talk opportunities is that it allows the teacher to determine students' levels of understanding and any misunderstandings that may occur.

Writing Conversations and Metalinguistic understanding

Developing metalinguistic understanding through teacher-led talk:

In the materials used to train teachers in this contextualised approach to the teaching of grammar we offer the following example. The teaching materials focus on the writing of fictional narrative, using Michael Morpurgo's novel, *Arthur, High King of Britain*, as a shared stimulus text. The extract of text below is from a re-telling of the opening of an episode of the BBC television series, *Merlin*, and the learning focus is on the sentence in bold:

*The crypt was cold and dimly lit, and smelt musty, of ancient times. Row by row, through the chamber, stood the burial caskets of people long since dead, knights and their ladies. **Cobwebs shivered in a shaft of moonlight piercing the gloom.***

The learning goal is to draw out both how this sentence creates a strong visual image, but also how it creates an atmosphere that makes the reader feel a little uneasy or scared. The teacher's talk focuses on three grammar choices, all inter-related: the grammar is highlighted without lengthy grammatical explanation and the questions open up discussion about the link between these choices and the effect on the reader:

- Look at the four nouns here – *cobwebs*, *shaft*, *moonlight* and *gloom*. They are creating a visual description or picture of the crypt. What images do they create for you of the crypt?

- Look at that very descriptive noun phrase: *a shaft of moonlight piercing the gloom*. Can you see that picture in your mind's eye? Could you paint it?
- Look at the two verbs – *shivered, piercing*. Is this a nice place to be? Why do you think the author has chosen those verbs? How might she want to make us feel?

Audio data recorded in lesson observations of teachers using this pedagogical approach show how teachers have taken this training model and made it their own. In the two examples below, which are both summary points in a lesson, the teachers open up talk about writing through making clear the link between the grammar focus and its effect in writing.

Teacher: We instinctively think of adjectives as being good for description but actually we found in that very descriptive bit about the lady in the crypt there were more nouns building up that atmosphere and helping us visualise what it looked like than there were adjectives. We're starting to look at the important part nouns play.

Teacher: A giant of a man **rode** in on a towering warhorse? **Pawed** the ground? **Tossing** its fine head. **Froze** the courage in a man's veins. We've got verbs that tell us...?

Student: His actions are firm and decisive ...confident man

Student: The horse seems aggressive, tossing and snorting and ready to fight

Teacher: The way that Michael Morpurgo is choosing the language has **shown** us that the horse is angry; he didn't just write "the horse is angry".

High-quality teacher talk also encourages students to think about why writers might have made certain choices, and invites students to think about and justify their own choices. In the first example, the students have been discussing Morpurgo's description of Guinevere with '*fingers, long white and dancing*', where the placing of the adjectives after the noun draw attention to the adjectival description. Here the teacher reinforces the principle that this is a choice, that other writers in other contexts may make a different choice, and crucially that children as writers can make these choices for themselves.

Teacher: As a writer, you can make that decision, can't you, as to which one sounds the best. It doesn't happen by accident, writers make that choice, and you have that choice: if you know that you can put your adjectives before your noun or after.

In the second example, the teaching focus is on how writers can vary where information is placed in a sentence to change the emphasis. The students have been looking at the moment in Morpurgo's story where the sword, Excalibur, rises from the lake. Morpurgo inverts the subject and verb in this sentence to emphasise the sense of amazement and to delay the appearance of the sword: '*And, to my amazement, up out of the lake came a shining sword, a hand holding it, and an arm in a white*

silk sleeve'. The teacher draws attention to this structure and then invites students to speculate on why Morpurgo may have made this choice.

Teacher: What is the subject of the sentence?

Student: The sword

Teacher: Why do you think he's chosen to do it this way round? Why has he left the shining sword – the subject - until later in the sentence?

In classrooms in England, this kind of talk about language choices and their effects on shaping meaning is very new, and leading discussion about these choices is not always easy, particularly if a teacher's own grammatical subject knowledge is not secure. However, our research has indicated that with appropriate training and support teachers can develop the pedagogical assurance to facilitate effective talk about language.

Considering metalinguistic understanding through student talk:

In our present ESRC study, interviews with students about their own writing make visible where their choices in writing have been conscious and deliberate. It is important to note that the study is indicating that writers make many choices which are not conscious and visible, and it is quite common for a student's writing to have effective examples of the grammar constructions that teaching has addressed, but for students not to comment on them. Elsewhere, however, writing conversations with students reveal a growing capacity to discuss both a linguistic choice and its intended effect.

Following a unit of work on narrative writing, in which one learning focus was the choice of first or third person for the narrative viewpoint, 12 year-old Jake explains his own decision to use first person, *'it's from the first person, it's through what he's seen, in his perspective'*, and he argues that this makes the writing *'more emotional and more personal'*. In a different context, looking at persuasive writing and how modal verbs can express different degrees of assertiveness or possibility, Ella (12 years old) discusses with the interviewer her choice of three different modal verbs and how she uses them in order to increase the persuasiveness of her piece.

Interviewer: *'You can make a difference'; 'you shall make a difference'; 'you will make a difference'*

Student: Modal verbs. It's like saying, like 'can' is like 'you could've if you joined', 'you shall if you joined', but then 'you will', meaning you actually will make a difference.

Interviewer: So you did you think about which order to put those three verbs, modal verbs?

Student: Yes because 'can' is like least of them: 'you will make a difference', 'shall' is like 'maybe', and 'will' is definitely, you will.

Interviewer: OK, so that wasn't accidental, to put them in order?

Student: No

It is relevant to note here that although Ella's explanation reveals her awareness of her metalinguistic choice, using the appropriate linguistic terminology, she expresses the effect indirectly through semantic explanation, rather than explicitly. A similar thing is evident in 9 year

old Isabel's discussion of a choice of image in her persuasive writing, modelled on Martin Luther-King's *I have a Dream* speech. Here her metalinguistic understanding is clear – she can identify a linguistic choice and explain logically why she has chosen it, but she does not use any metalinguistic terminology to support her explanation:

- Student: When I did the last bit, '*It's a dream deeply rooted in every designer's dream*', I put '*deeply rooted*' because like some people just put '*planted into ...*'
- Interviewer: Yea
- Student: But I thought, well, if you put '*planted*' it can be easily pulled out and if you put '*deeply rooted*' it will be like a tree stump, it would be harder to come off.

This pattern of verbalising language choices without metalinguistic terminology, or without absolute precision in describing the effect may be developmental. Certainly, it is the older students in the study who are most explicit about their choices and correspondingly, the youngest who are least explicit. In the conversation below, Isabel is discussing the position of time adverbials in her writing. The class were using Karen Wallace's dual text *Think of an Eel* as a shared stimulus text and were writing information texts about the lifecycle of an animal, trying to write like a scientist. The lesson preceding the writing conversation below looked at how time adverbials can move around the sentence, and the teacher had stressed the writer's prerogative to choose: '*It makes sense both ways around, but you have a personal choice; you have to choose.*' In the writing conversation, Isabel shows she understands how to move time adverbials around the sentence but she is much less convincing in explaining the effect of that choice:

- Interviewer: Let's have a look at the ones you've got. So let's find '*After four months, two young cubs, are born in a burrow*', so how else might you have said that?
- Student: '*In a burrow two young are born after four months*'
- Interviewer: So you could have done it that way round. Do you think you made the best choice by putting ...?
- Student: Yea
- Interviewer: You have, I think you're probably right. Why do you think it works better that way round?
- Student: Because like...I didn't...it made more sense to what I was writing

Conclusion

This article has offered a new way to think about the role of grammar in the curriculum, which is rooted in a theoretical conceptualisation linking the explicit teaching of grammar within the instructional context of writing with the development of metalinguistic understanding. A core element of this metalinguistic development is the encouragement of high-quality dialogic talk about language choices and their meaning-making effects. This theoretical framework has been used to inform a pedagogical design which has been empirically tested through a series of studies. These studies repeatedly indicate statistically significant impact of the approach on writing attainment, with varying strengths of significance, but they also indicate the critical role of the teacher in mediating metalinguistic understanding in writing.

Firstly, the studies have highlighted that the most effective adoption of the pedagogical design is evident in teachers who have strong grammatical knowledge and are confident in exploring texts from a linguistic perspective. Secondly, the studies reveal that the teacher's management of metalinguistic talk is critical, scaffolding their learning through carefully-designed questioning, which encourages discussion of the relationship between a linguistic choice and its effect in writing, and which probes students' metalinguistic understanding by prompting them to explain and justify their own linguistic choices. Our most recent study is indicating that verbalising metalinguistic knowledge, particularly the explaining of effects, may be developmental as it is more common in older children in our study. However, further research is needed to examine more closely the intrinsic relationship between what metalinguistic learning teachers emphasise and model in their lessons and what students can then verbalise independently.

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